annual events held by the Hamilton Lodge at the regal Rockland Palace, which could accommodate up to six thousand people. Only slightly smaller were the balls given irregularly at the dazzling Savoy Ballroom, with its crystal chandeliers and elegant marble staircase. The organizers would obtain a police permit making the ball, and its participants, legal for the evening. The highlight of the event was the beauty contest, in which the fashionably dressed drags would vie for the title of Queen of the Ball."

Paris Is Burning is a combustible mix of race, gender, sexuality, class, and identity issues. Contradictions speak out as loudly and as candidly as the subjects. Feminists have raised legitimate questions about men replicating the submissive and passive female identity constructed to oppress women vertically *and* horizontally. "Femme Realness" condones the very things feminists have condemned and criticized about patriarchally constructed female identity. That the balls reward what feminists reject is not an issue to be taken lightly.

Speaking about the occurrence of sex-change operations, Pepper LeBeija said, "I've been a man, and I've been a man who emulated a woman. I've never been a woman. I've never had that service once a month. I've never been pregnant. I can never say how a woman feels. I can only say how a man who acts like a woman or dresses like a woman feels. I never wanted to have a sex change, that's just taking it a little too far. . . . A lot of the kids that I know, they got the sex change because they felt, 'Oh, I've been treated so bad as a drag queen. If I get a pussy, I'll be treated fabulous.' But women get treated bad. They get beat. They get robbed. They get dogged. So, having the vagina, that doesn't mean that you're going to have a fabulous life, it might in fact be worse."

Paris Is Burning reveals what price some of us are willing to pay for membership, privilege, and realness. Realness is valued for the obverse of what one expects realness to be. It

isn't candor that defines realness, it's illusion. Realness is the ability to pass as something you are not, as in poor for rich, male for female, gay for straight.

The erasure or silencing of identity through the use of illusion might be considered simply an act of entertainment in the context of the balls if it weren't such a willful act of survival and affirmation exercised in a state of increasing desperation. The yearning festering behind the illusions is a yearning for a full equality and a common privilege that America has yet to deliver, and it may have to be forcibly taken, by any means necessary, if any of us are truly to be real.